

Tuesday, February 21, 2023

TO: Melony Griffith, Chair of Senate Finance Committee and Committee Members; Guy Guzzone, Chair of Senate Budget and Taxation Committee; and Committee Members

FROM: Mark Bryer, The Nature Conservancy, Chesapeake Bay Program Director; and Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations

POSITION: Support SB 433 Aquaculture - Economic Development - Woman- and Minority-Owned Shellfish Aquaculture Enterprise Fund

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports SB 433 offered by Senator Klausmeier. For the past two decades, the world has looked to the Chesapeake Bay to learn what's possible in oyster restoration. No effort in the world matches the scale of what has been accomplished here, and TNC has been proud to support and invest in oyster restoration along with many others during this time.

SB 433 builds on oyster restoration successes by establishing an enterprise fund that will assist woman- and minority-owned aquaculture businesses that are just starting or are looking to expand within the Chesapeake Bay. This loan program will provide up to \$50,000 in grant funding for projects that support lease applications, operating or capital expenses and training to support these businesses in the aquaculture industry. The bill will also ensure that the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO) is working with traditional minority-serving institutions such as historically Black colleges and universities, trade associations that represent woman- and minority-owned businesses, the aquaculture industry and the Governor's Office of Small, Minority and Women Business Affairs to identify potential loan recipients. By providing financial support to woman- and minority-owned businesses, this enterprise fund will help expand access to the aquaculture industry in Maryland. Investments like these are vital to building an inclusive industry that will advance restoration efforts while also benefiting underrepresented communities, which have historically been excluded from advancement opportunities in the aquaculture and conservation industries.

TNC has a history of working across sectors to leverage private, state and federal funding to support the aquaculture industry in Maryland. Our Supporting Oyster Aquaculture and Restoration (SOAR) program is a good example of leveraging investments to establish alternative markets for oyster farmers to sell oysters for reef restoration projects, as well as to expand the Shellfish Grower's Resilience Fund in Maryland. In 2022, TNC received \$150,000 in Congressionally Directed Funding thanks to Senators Cardin and Van Hollen's support. This funding will be used to purchase farmed oysters in the spring of 2023 for use in sanctuary restoration in Maryland. We are also excited to use a portion of the funding to sponsor summer 2023 internships for BIPOC college students to learn about the shellfish industry and sustainability in Maryland. In addition, TNC will receive funding through NOAA's resilience fund to continue SOAR in eight states for the next four years, including in Maryland. At least \$250,000 of those funds will come to the Chesapeake. These projects will build industry resiliency and center diversity, equity, and inclusion in Maryland's aquaculture industry.

TNC commends Senator Klausmeier for advancing legislation that is aimed at investing in Maryland's critical oyster industry by enabling more diverse participation and access. SB 433 reflects a positive step forward in the long road to restoring oysters to the Chesapeake.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on SB 433.